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SUBJECT: GOVERNOR ATTA DENIES RESIGNATION RUMORS

REF: Kabul 1486

Summary

¶1. (SBU) Balkh Governor Atta has denied that President Karzai has asked for his resignation because of his support for opposition presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah. Atta said he would resign only if President Karzai also agrees to resign. Several high-profile delegations from Kabul have visited Atta to persuade him to rejoin Karzai's team, to no avail. Atta accused Karzai of campaigning during a recent visit to Faryab province and of sending other government officials, most notably Paktiya Governor Juma Khan Hamdard, to the north for the same purpose. He said there was no watershed moment that turned him away from Karzai. "Political dignity" for his people is what Atta wants, and he is placing his bets squarely on Abdullah to deliver that.

"Karzai Did Not Ask Me to Resign"

¶2. (SBU) During a 45 minute-long meeting in his guesthouse, a confident Atta told State PRT officer on June 17 that reports swirling in the media and even among his own staff that President Karzai has asked him to resign are patently false. Defiantly, Atta said Karzai does not possess the authority to fire or replace him since Karzai's term as president officially ended on May 22. If Karzai tried to replace him before the elections, Atta would not step down, and would only resign if Karzai also resigns. [Note: Independent Directorate of Local Governance Director Jelani Popal told PRT Counselor June 18 that he had sent a letter to Governor Atta advising him that he could not use government resources or time to campaign for Abdullah, or he would be removed from his position. End note.]

Wants "Political Dignity"

¶3. (SBU) Asked whether there was any particular incident that turned him away from Karzai, Atta said no, and again expressed his disdain for the Karzai administration and Karzai's choice of Marshall Fahim as a running mate (Reftel). He added that he wants "political dignity" for his people, and Karzai has not provided that. Atta acknowledged that it was Karzai's embrace of Atta's rivals General Dostum (Junbesh Party), Member of Parliament Mohaqqueq (Wahdat-Mardum Party), and Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan that reinforced his decision to support Abdullah. He pointed to what he called Karzai's lack of dignity in making a deal to allocate certain ministerial seats to Junbesh and Wahdat-Mardum during a signing ceremony at the Turkish Embassy in Kabul. Asked to explain why he had previously displayed such strong signs of support for Karzai, especially during the Nowruz celebration in March, Atta responded that as governor, it would not have been appropriate for him to denigrate the Karzai government's achievements in public, even though some development projects funded by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and USAID, happened in spite of Karzai. Criticizing Karzai in public

would have increased ethnic tensions and created a climate of anarchy, he said, which would have negated the great sacrifices that he and other former mujahideen fighters have made to help form a national government. Atta added that he has voiced his displeasure in private meetings with Karzai about the inequitable allocation of development money to the northern region and the low capacity of Karzai's team, but that approach never led to any changes.

Karzai and Associates Campaigning in Office

14. (SBU) Atta said that as a sitting governor, he will not express his support for Abdullah through the media because that would be an abuse of his office. Rather, it is Karzai who is misusing his position to do campaigning, Atta alleged. During a June 11 trip to Andkhoy district of Faryab province, ostensibly to inaugurate development projects, Karzai met with his supporters in a mosque, and once out of the view of television cameras, revealed the names of his campaign team in Faryab and urged people to support his campaign. Atta even mimicked Karzai's mannerisms in describing how the president unrolled a scroll of paper bearing the names of his campaign leaders. Even though he was tipped off in advance about the trip, Atta was not informed by Karzai's people that the president would be landing briefly in Mazar, and thus did not greet Karzai at the airport as he has done on previous occasions. Atta said he has not spoken to Karzai in two months.

15. (SBU) Atta alleged that Karzai is also deploying other government officials to campaign for him. He accused Paktiya Governor Juma Khan Hamdard - an Atta rival and Hezb-e-Islami leader for the north - of campaigning for Karzai during a recent swing through several northern provinces. Prior to his departure, Hamdard

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told State PRT Paktiya officer that Karzai was deploying him on an "official mission" to the north - a mission that his staff implausibly said had to do with disaster preparations. Similarly, Lower House MP Zalmay Khan accompanied three helicopters delivering food assistance to communities in Badakhshan province, where he also delivered stump speeches for Karzai.

Kabul Delegations Go Back Empty-Handed

16. (SBU) At least three delegations from Kabul have visited Atta over the past few weeks, offering him a "blank check" to rejoin the Karzai camp. Steadfast in his decision, Atta has refused their overtures. Among those in the delegations were Karzai advisor Yasin Osmani, National Directorate of Security (NDS) Chief Amrullah Saleh, NDS deputy Engineer Ibrahim, and Upper House MP Mohammed Hanif Hanafi. Some prominent former commanders also visited to seek Atta's support for Karzai, but Atta, flashing a wide grin, said he did not want to disclose their names because he has since "turned" them to Abdullah's camp.

On Karzai's Campaign Team in North

17. (SBU) Asked what he made of the naming of Junbesh supporter MP Ghazanfar as Karzai's campaign coordinator for the north, Atta downplayed it. Ghazanfar is rich but has no influence in Balkh, and is only interested in seeing that his sister retains her position as Minister of Women's Affairs. Atta said Ghazanfar is Karzai's man in Balkh province only - not the region. This contradicts other information we received from Mohammed Sabeer, who says he is the Balkh provincial coordinator for Karzai's campaign. Atta also said that Junbesh leader Sayeed Noorullah will lead Karzai's campaign in Jowzjan and Haji Akbar Wahdat in Faryab.

If not Atta, Who?

18. (SBU) If Abdullah wins, Atta wants to remain governor of Balkh, but would consider a national-level appointment only if Atta's supporters want him to accept it. But if Karzai wins, who would replace him as governor? Certainly not a Junbesh or Wahdat pick, he

opined, because "the people of Balkh would not accept it." He was not able to finish his thoughts on this question as just then, a delegation of Balkh religious scholars entered the room for their meeting with Atta.

Comment

19. (SBU) Atta is resolute in his backing of Abdullah and is very confident that his influence in the north and other parts of the country will swing the vote against Karzai. Neither money nor positions offered him by Karzai's people have swayed his decision. At least through the elections, Atta appears untouchable in his position as governor. If Karzai wins, Atta seems content to remain squarely in the opposition camp and to continue using his well-established power base and business interests to exert influence in the region. Atta's departure from the Balkh governorship would open the door for Dostum or Mohaqqueq to claim a greater stake in northern affairs.

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